





Wellspring Derby Preview Picks

By Bill Doolittle

First, thanks to those in attendance at the Wellspring Derby Preview Party last week at Churchill Downs, and to all of you who support Wellspring's work in mental health recovery throughout the year. The 26th Derby Preview was a great success for supporting Wellspring and the people the organization serves.

In our talk at the end of the event, I introduced likely contenders for the 150th Run for the Roses, but quickly noted that two horses stand well above others in the field, Florida Derby winner **Fierceness** and Blue Grass Stakes winner **Sierra Leone.** They're also the betting favorites in the Derby. But because there are two of them, and 18 more who will get bet, the betting odds should be decent – if we pick the right horse.

I always reserve my final pick until the contenders have arrived in Louisville and twirled out their final workouts over the track at Churchill Downs – which they did this past weekend. Good to report that both looked stellar.

Fierceness looked smooth and fast last Friday, gliding effortlessly over the freshly harrowed Downs dirt. Light on his feet, and silent in breath. In short, a picture. I asked my scouting pal Kathy Abrams what she thought of Fierceness, and she had a quick answer: "I think they're going to have a hard time beating him."

Sure will.

But I also think Sierra Leone looks ready to roll, and should find the Derby Distance, 1 ¼ miles, very much to his liking.

The pair are opposites in style. Fierceness will be on top or close to the pace in the Kentucky Derby. In the Florida Derby he stepped fast from the gate, went right to the top and aired out the field. Through the homestretch, under rider Johnny Velazquez, Fierceness effortlessly opened his advantage to 13 lengths at the finish. Dominant.



iSierra Leone Photo by Gail Kamenish

But maybe not in the Kentucky Derby. If there are challengers to Fierceness, the race's long distance could be a question. To bring back a pedigree term from the past, he's "over" on dosage, which is the wrong direction to be in a 1 ¼ miles race.

What I like about Sierra Leone is his pure power. Horse power.



iiSierra Leone Photo by Gail Kamenish

Sierra Leone comes from behind – and keeps coming. He was well back in the Blue Grass (as in his other races), but came on strong, opening up by nearly three lengths in the final eighth mile at Keeneland. Afterwards, rider Tyler Gaffalione said he gave Sierra Leone a calming touch on the shoulder as the horse got to the outside on the turn and began flying past horses. "I actually had to slow him down about the 5/16ths pole," said Gaffalione. "I didn't want him to get to the lead too soon."

A very interesting comment from the rider. Very confident. As seems trainer Chad Brown, who's been all smiles coming to the Derby. Like he knows what he's got.

I also have another horse I like in the 150th Derby. Not a longshot, but a sort of middle-odds horse that I am thinking is not going to get toasted at the betting window. That's Resilience, who is an improving horse. And if you dig back several generations in his dam's pedigree you come to a strong presence of old-line European distance blood. I don't expect Resilience to knock off either of the top two, but I do expect him to "stay." That's old-time horse talk for a horse who can handle classic distances. A stayer. I think Resilience will be running at the end, and who knows how many pieces of the pie he might pick up.

How to bet?

Well, the first thing is do not let anybody talk you off your horse – including me. The last thing you want to do is listen to some guy touting some other horse. Stick to the horse you like. They're all good. And as we have seen, a stranger may pop down out of the clouds to light up the tote board. "Who?"

But I don't think this time.

Obviously, you should make a straight win bet on your horse. Then go shopping for friends that can help make the exactas and trifectas pay off big. That's one of the things – exotic betting – that distinguishes the Derby of the 21st Century from those of the past: Big payoffs. With 20 horses in the field, and each with its own betting interest, the arithmetic of wagering has exploded.

Keeping it simple, I recommend taking a $1 exacta wheel – your horse on top, with *All* the other horses second. That's 19 combinations = $19. Simpler to bet than it sounds.

Then, take another $1 exacta wheel of *All* first and your horse second. Another $19. Because if your horse is good enough to win the Kentucky Derby, he certainly is good enough to run second.

If that all seems likes Japanese Calculus, keep in mind there're two Japanese horses in the race. Both are undefeated. One is good.

That's **Forever Young** (11), with a great song name. I also see a case for **Dornoch** (1), who may be looking for lead right out of his No. 1 post position. I have a hunch **Domestic Product** will be forwardly placed, with **Chasing Freedom** reserving his bid for later.

Plus, there's 13 more contenders who don't have anywhere else they need to be at 6:57 pm on the first Saturday in May. Who knows what they'll be up to?

Good Luck!

1. **Sierra Leone** No. **2**
2. **Resilience** No. **19**

Others to watch: Catching Freedom (4), Fierceness (17), Dornoch (1), Domestic Product (15), Forever Young (11).